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IV.—*The Course in English and its Value as a Discipline.*

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AT its last annual session, this Association listened to two papers, one on "The Place of English in the College Curriculum," by Professor Hunt, of Princeton College, and the other on "The Requirements in English for admission to College," by Professor McElroy, of the University of Pennsylvania, and at its preceding session to one on "The College Course in English Literature, how it may be Improved," by Professor Hart, of the University of Cincinnati,—the subjects of all of which, taken together, are cognate with that of the present paper. I do not design, however, to go over the same ground as that so well treated in those papers.¹

The object of this paper is to ascertain what it is practicable to teach in a full course of English, and what results for mental discipline are likely to follow from such teaching. In this inquiry, I regard the school and college course as one connected whole, for the college teacher must have a suitable basis to build on, or he will work at great disadvantage.

Every college teacher of English has been struck, I doubt not, with the lack of preparation in English on the part of his students. Even elementary mistakes in spelling, punctuation, and grammar are met with; but those who do not make such mistakes are incapable of explaining the most common forms and constructions. They are frequently guilty of blunders which, if made in Latin, would meet with the severest condemnation. *Credite experto*. In Hamlet (II. 2, 145), occurs the line,

"*Which done, she took the fruits of my advice,*"

(the advice of old Polonius to Ophelia, as some may remember): not only were certain students unable to trace the

¹ Since this paper was written, I have received a copy of the TRANSACTIONS OF THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION for 1884-5, so that the papers themselves are now accessible in full, and I do not doubt that they will be very serviceable to many teachers of English.

antecedent of "*which*," but several could not explain the construction "*which done*." Even at this late day there is shown ignorance of the terms *strong* and *weak* verbs. Jacob Grimm would turn in his grave at some of the answers to a question for a definition of these terms given at an entrance examination. Also, with many students every word in *-ing* is necessarily a present participle, and the forms of the verb *to wit* are in hopeless confusion. But when we find Bishop Wordsworth, in his "Shakespeare's Knowledge and Use of the Bible" (pp. 25 and 41), speaking of "The letter '*a*' prefixed to nouns, adjectives, and to *participles*, as—to '*go a-fishing*';" and talking of "*Wis, Wit, and Wot* (originally the *past* tense of the former),"—to quote his words exactly,—we cannot wonder at young men just out of school, but I thought that we had made some progress in the last twenty years. As to elementary phonology, the most complete ignorance is displayed. Many students are unable to designate the diphthongs, or classify the consonants, in the English alphabet. Even in the examination for scholarships I have been advised that no questions in Rhetoric ought to be asked, and only the simplest in English Grammar, for the official requirement of "a complete acquaintance with the grammatical and rhetorical structure of the English language," is to be judged from the way in which the Latin and Greek translations are made. I have also been told that students find the entrance examinations in English harder than those in any other subject, when only the smallest modicum of knowledge of the most elementary parts of the subject is required. It argues simply gross lack of proper preparation. If we pass from grammar to versification, the state of knowledge, or ignorance, is much worse. Unless students happen to have studied Latin versification, they know nothing about metre, not even the common terms used, so that the college teacher must begin at the beginning even for Shakspeare, much more for Chaucer. As to the history of the language, their minds are a perfect blank. They would as soon call English a Keltic as a Teutonic tongue; they have not the slightest idea of its elements, nor of the historical development of the language on English soil; their notions are extremely foggy as to who the so-called Anglo-Saxons were, or where they came from,—which argues a slight deficiency in historical instruction also. As to the literature, the case is almost as bad.

Occasionally some have studied an outline of its history, and have read some of Shakspeare's plays. But with the majority King Alfred is but a name, Chaucer but little more, and the most elementary historical facts as to later writers are unknown, or *misknown*, any acquaintance with their works being out of the question. I presume that the experience of others will confirm this, although some may be more favorably situated, and still we are told that it is useless to study *English*, that the knowledge of English comes naturally; verily, *such* knowledge.

This being the state of the case, such the complaint, can we not "reform it altogether?" Is it not possible to get the *schools* to remedy the matter, to improve their courses in English, even if they have to leave out something else? It seems to me to be possible for the schools to teach something more than elementary English grammar, spelling, punctuation, and composition. though if all would teach even these well, it would very much relieve the college teacher. To these subjects the school should superadd elementary instruction in versification, in the history of the language, and at least in the *history* of the literature. These subjects are eminently suitable for the higher classes in schools and are easily taught in connection with the reading of authors. Many schools read a play or more of Shakspeare: they should teach their pupils to read rhythmically and to understand the structure of the verse;—to understand also the language of Shakspeare and its points of difference from present English. There is a great hue and cry raised in some quarters against using Shakspeare for instruction in grammar and versification. I have no sympathy with that, no more than with such a cry against the similar use of Vergil and Horace. But this should not be the *whole* instruction in either case; a knowledge of the contents and spirit of the work read should be required in both cases, for the teaching of the classics fails of its end if it stops with grammar and versification. By a little effort on the part of the teacher Chaucer might be similarly taught in schools and to great advantage. The light thrown on present English in the explanation of forms and constructions would abundantly repay the extra labor required. When once a common possession, the language of Chaucer would be no longer regarded as uncouth, but would be known to be as "good English" as we speak to-day. There is a better opportunity here for teaching grammar and versification than in the case of

Shakspere, and for widening the linguistic horizon of the student.

Whether these particular authors are read in the schools or not, the history of the language and of its literature should be taught. We have long since had a very useful Primer of the history of English literature (Stopford Brooke's), and there are numerous Manuals suitable for school use.

I am not of those who condemn the use of such works because they talk *about* literature and are not literature itself. For the stage of instruction that I am speaking of, they are most suitable. It is just these facts, hard facts contained in such works, that college students should know, and if they do not get them now, at school, they must get them at college, when they should be otherwise occupied, for they must have them in order to know the historical development of English literature. But we are not so fortunate with respect to a suitable Primer of the history of the language. Teachers who have not studied the language historically "fight shy" of Dr. Morris's "Elementary Lessons in Historical English Grammar," and even of Prof. Lounsbury's useful "History of the English Language." I should like to recount my experience with the former work in the Freshman class of a college, and its consequences,—*sed de praeteritis nil nisi bonum*. As soon as Prof. Lounsbury's book was published, I substituted it. Doubtless a suitable Primer will come in time, and this is but a temporary disadvantage. Only let the *teachers* learn English historically, and they will never rest until they teach the history of the language in their schools. A similar experience seems to have been felt in Great Britain also, as witness the very recent work of Prof. Meiklejohn, of the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, "The English Language, its Grammar, History, and Literature," prepared expressly for the training of teachers. The author hopes "that the book will also be useful in Ladies' Colleges and Middle-Class Schools, to candidates for Local Examinations, and to other classes of students." The book is open to objections, and it were easy to find fault with it. Some may doubt the wisdom of trying to include so many things in such small compass. There are omissions in the section on Literature, and the section on Language is merely descriptive. The author himself realizes that these sections are only "slight sketches of the History of our Language and of its Literature," but he hopes that they

will "throw the student into the attitude of mind of Oliver Twist and induce him to ask for more." The author is on the right track, and whatever criticisms may be made of his book, if the young ladies master it thoroughly, they will soon know more about the English language than the majority of college graduates in this country.

If the schools will not do this work, some of it must be done at college; for, as already stated, the college teacher must have a basis to work on. Happy will he be if he does not have to supply most of the elementary knowledge that his students should have acquired long ago. It is rigidly required that the schools shall impart some knowledge of the elements of Latin, Greek, and Mathematics, but it is by no means required that an equivalent preparation in English shall be given. One would naturally suppose that a more advanced preparation in English would be required, but this is regarded as a Utopian dream.

Until the schools do better, and teach carefully Shakspeare and Chaucer, the *college* teacher may base his elementary instruction in the language on these two writers; and in addition to instruction in grammar and versification, he will be able to treat points of textual and of æsthetic criticism to greater advantage than can be done at school, owing to greater maturity of mind on the part of his students. It will be possible, too, to treat more thoroughly the progress of the language between Chaucer and Shakspeare, and since Shakspeare, than can be done at school. If it is possible, however, I should advise the college teacher to begin his study of the language with its oldest form, the so-called *Anglo-Saxon*, or *Old English*, as our modern scholars will have it,—which appellation will suit well enough provided that it is understood. In this way we build our house upon a rock, we secure a foundation that cannot be shaken, and the later study of *Middle English* will be thereby greatly facilitated. It seems to me useless to begin the study of Middle English of the twelfth or thirteenth century without a knowledge of Old English, for the student will meet, at every turn, with difficulties that he cannot explain, and we shall be needlessly delayed in our work. It seems also insufficient to study Anglo-Saxon (Old English) alone, either before or after Chaucer, and not to continue the course through the Middle English period, for this is the most difficult period of English, far more so than Old English, and a knowledge of it is neces-

sary in order to bridge the chasm. Without it we lack the link to make the chain serviceable. During this period we might limit the reading of our students to specimens of the *East Midland* dialect alone, as the forerunner of the language of Chaucer, but it is very desirable that the student should know also something of the Northern and the Southern dialects, for both contributed to the formation of Modern English, and he might easily read a few specimens of these along with those of the East Midland dialect, while paying special attention to the development of the last-named. This historical method in the study of English is decidedly the most fruitful, and the best suited to secure a knowledge of the origin and history of the language, which knowledge is as desirable for college students as that of any other language in the curriculum, to say the least of it. I have been teaching this method,—and preaching it, too, on suitable occasions,²—now for many years, and it seems to me the only method by which philological training in English can be satisfactorily secured, and by which English can hold its own as a discipline by the side of the classical and the other modern languages.

But before dwelling upon this, let us glance at the college course in English from the *literary* side, though I might now content myself with referring to the papers of Prof. Hart and Prof. Hunt. Here it is usual to begin with the study of Rhetoric, and this is, perhaps, necessary, unless the schools will take that up, but I am almost inclined to agree with Prof. Hart that it should be excluded from the course of literature (Proceedings of the Modern Language Association for 1884, p. xi; Transactions, Vol. I, p. 85). Any extensive study of Rhetoric in college seems to me productive of very little fruit; “it costs more than it comes to.” The elementary principles can be easily learnt at school in so far as they are an aid to English composition, which is the only practical use of the study. It is a question whether the more advanced study of Rhetoric is of any service beyond that of formal discipline, which can be better attained by the study of Mathematics and of Logic, and Logic does not at all belong to the course in English, though it is sometimes tacked on to it. The principles and rules of English composition should be learnt by the student, and if they have

² See a paper on this subject in the Proceedings of the National Educational Association for 1879.

not been learnt at school, they must be taught at college, hence the reason for placing Rhetoric in the literary course. But taking up the study of *literature*, we want first a general view of the whole field, and here the advantage of a previous study of the history of English literature at school will be manifest. It will save time for the college teacher, and he will be able to take up representative authors and treat them at greater length, the students meanwhile reading selected works of the authors treated. The study of separate periods of literature, or of separate forms of literature, as the drama, may well form a part of the college course, which should consist of something more than an historical outline of writers and works, as it now frequently is, owing to the lack of previous preparation at school, the limited time allowed to the course in college, and the want of suitable books for private reading, books published at a cost within the student's means. It is productive of little good for the teacher to talk about an author and his works unless the student has in hand at least some one work of that author to read and judge for himself of the style and thought. The college library has usually but one copy of the works of any author, and that is not enough to "go around." The student cannot purchase even *one* work of each author, for he has not the means to buy a small library. It seems to me that, in a historical course of English literature, we want a short representative work of each prominent author, printed in cheap form, paper-back say, so that the student can own it and read it for himself, following the lectures on that author. We need, for example, a companion volume to Minto's "Manual of English Prose Literature," which shall contain a short work, or an extended extract from a long work, of each leading writer discussed in that book, in order to give an idea of the author's style and manner, and it should be, too, of sufficient value as literature to make it worth the reading. Mr. Saintsbury's "Specimens of English Prose Style from Malory to Macaulay" is on the right plan,—and his preliminary essay on English Prose Style is admirable,—but the extracts are too short to give an idea of an author's writings; we want a much fuller work for such illustration. Both of these books relate to prose. For poetry, Minto's "Characteristics of English Poets from Chaucer to Shirley" is excellent for criticism as far as it goes, but it stops too soon. It should be used in connection with Ward's

"English Poets," or some similar work, although this contains more minor poets than most teachers will have time or inclination to treat. Also, it omits the drama, and for the course in that form of literature, a separate work will be needed, such as Keltie's "British Dramatists," which is very useful for the Elizabethan drama and ought to be accessible to students in a cheap form. For the early drama we can refer to Hazlitt's edition of Dodsley's "Old English Plays" (in fifteen volumes), and of this the library copy can circulate in the class. I have dwelt upon the need of works of authors for students to read, as there is no lack of Manuals of the history of English literature, which some teachers may, however, prefer not to use, but to give their own lectures instead, though experience shows that time may be saved by the use of a good text-book, as it consumes time to take notes and some students find great difficulty in taking them. After all, lectures are but the teacher's own text-book, which may be more satisfactory to him than any printed text-book, although the latter may be equally as beneficial to the student. Where the saving of time is important, some teachers may prefer to use the text-book as an outline and to supplement it by means of lectures, for the preparation of lectures certainly promotes the teacher's knowledge of his subject, and this is reflected in his students.

Having thus sketched the main outlines of the course in English, let us briefly consider its *value as a discipline*. This is necessary, for, in the preparatory stage of education, no study can claim pre-eminence solely on the ground of the knowledge to be gained from it, but it must also possess some disciplinary value. I do not intend to refer to the contest between language and science, for I premise, as a fundamental and indisputable proposition, that *all* language study has a certain amount of disciplinary value of the greatest benefit in mental training. No teacher of language can have failed to observe this, and if in any particular case it has failed to produce fruit, the result is so much the worse for both pupil and teacher. The teaching of language is as strictly *scientific* as that of any one of the natural sciences, and it has its necessary place in the training of the mind. Nor do I intend to discuss the modern versus the classical languages, for I have no quarrel with the classicists. I realize too well the benefit derived from the study of the classical languages to care to dispute it. I always advise my

students to study, if they can, both ancient and both modern languages (i. e. French and German); if they can study only one of each, to study Latin and German, and at all events to try to learn some one other language than their own, for without it they lack the great advantage of comparison of languages, and of seeing how other peoples express the same ideas with themselves; but, unfortunately, all cannot study even *one* ancient or *one* modern language. Moreover, in discussing the value of the study of English as a discipline, we are relieved from considering the *natural* method, or the *unnatural* method (as our friends would probably call it), for all boys have learnt some English after a fashion, and we wish to know what benefit the further school and college study of it will bring them.

It is the general experience of teachers that it is difficult to interest boys in the formal study of English grammar, but this is, nevertheless, a necessary discipline and should not be abandoned on that account. At the very beginning the pupil should learn the classification of sounds by the organs of speech and the quality of breath with which the sounds are uttered, so that he will have nothing to unlearn hereafter in any language, and will have an elementary basis for phonetic training; that also it may not be possible to find a young man of twenty who cannot tell the difference between a dental and a labial, or between a surd and a sonant, and cannot distinguish either when he hears it, for this is no imaginary case. He should learn, too, that *letters* are but signs of sounds, and that the English sounds are by no means the necessary ones for particular characters. If he is studying any other language, this may be easily illustrated, but it is hard sometimes to get the idea out of older heads that the English sound is the absolute and necessary sound for a particular letter. He will then comprehend much more easily, at a later period, how the sounds of letters have greatly changed in English itself, and how certain characters, both vowel and consonant, have replaced others. Here is a phonetic discipline that should not be lost sight of in the earliest stage. The extreme simplicity of English forms of nouns and adjectives does not present much for the pupil to learn here, but he should be carefully taught the origin of such inflections as remain, particularly of the so-called "irregular" plurals of nouns and comparison of adjectives. The pronouns afford a wider field for linguistic teaching, especially the personal pro-

nouns, which have preserved most inflections, and which become more interesting as the pupil learns more about them. The verbs, however, when correctly classified, supply the best means for linguistic training. Let the appellation "irregular" for the *strong* verbs be forever banished from the terminology of the English grammar, and let the pupil understand that these verbs are as regular,—if the grammar-makers would only treat them rightly,—as the so-called "regular" or *weak* verbs: if the term is kept at all, it should be applied only to the modal auxiliaries, the preteritive-presents, or *strong-weak* verbs. Most English grammars present their *strong* verbs in inextricable confusion, and expect the pupil to commit them to memory in alphabetical order. Even Mason's, so excellent in many respects, has a wrong classification of the *strong* verbs, one almost as empirical as that of other grammars. The origin of the verbal inflections should also be taught, that the pupil may avoid the blunder already mentioned of confounding forms in *-ing*, and other like blunders, and may have a sounder knowledge of his own language.

The comparative absence of inflections in English renders the teaching of syntax a better mental training than it is in a more highly inflected language. The relations being strictly logical, the thought of the pupil is exercised to discern them, and while this can usually be easily done on account of the narrow limits of variation in the position of words, this study exercises the mental powers of boys and serves to impress grammatical categories upon their minds. The analysis of sentences in this elementary stage is an excellent training, and I fail to see why it cannot develop the mental powers as well as in any other language. The more highly inflected languages present greater difficulties to the memory,—though it may be questioned whether this is an advantage,—but the relations of sentences are the same in these different members of one common family of languages.

Passing to the *collegiate* teaching of the English language, if we begin, as suggested, with the teaching of the oldest form of English, *Anglo-Saxon*, we are at once confronted with a much more highly inflected language, one that possesses all the advantages that may be claimed for the study of inflectional languages, and, at the same time, one not too far removed from present English to make it an essentially different language. It is, too, a representative Teutonic language, preserving fully

the common scheme of Teutonic phonology and inflection, analogous to that of other Indo-European languages. The linguistic training to be obtained from the earnest study of the Anglo-Saxon language is of the highest order. The phonetic basis of the *strong* verb may be seen here in all its forms, and the operation of phonetic laws common to other Teutonic languages may be scientifically studied, while here they are not so complicated in their working as in some other languages, the Old Icelandic, for example. As a purely grammatical discipline,—leaving out of view for the present all other considerations,—this study is worthy of a place in all of our colleges, particularly for those students who have failed to secure such discipline by the previous study of the classical languages. But it has this one peculiar and inestimable advantage over any classical or other modern language that, being the oldest known form of English, we may trace historically the development of the present language out of this earlier prototype, a kind of discipline that can only be secured otherwise by a knowledge of Latin, Old and Modern French, or of Old, Middle and New High German. Knowing then the beginning and the end of the development, we can readily supply the missing links by the study of *Middle English*, already stated to be a necessary step in the thorough knowledge of Modern English. It is, too, a study, in which, when this necessary basis is once secured, students will become much interested. The wearing away of inflections, the phonetic changes in both roots and terminations, the historical derivation of words and forms, are phenomena to which the classical languages, as studied in college, present no parallel, and as the study of the modern languages is usually limited to the study of the *present* forms of French and German, it is a discipline that the student will get in no other way. Besides training his linguistic faculty, it enables him to see *how* his own language has come to be what it is.

Moreover, in the study of Middle English, we trace the contact of Norman-French and English, the influence of the former upon the latter, the consequent changes in the phonology of old words and the introduction of new words, so that we study in the language itself the historical origin of our composite phonology and vocabulary. Is not this a linguistic discipline worth securing, altogether apart from its results in furthering the student's knowledge of English itself? This is not a study to be

relegated to a post-graduate course, which few attend. Inasmuch as a knowledge of English is of more value to an English-speaking man than a knowledge of any other language, the students in general should have the opportunity of pursuing the historical study of English as an undergraduate course. If they decline to pursue it, the college at least is blameless. But if there are no "protected" studies, if this study is put on a par with every other in the requirements for *all* degrees, if the students are encouraged to find out for themselves by actual trial what is to be gained from the study rather than discouraged from it by a lack of appreciation of its advantages, students will not decline to pursue it, and it will, in time, become one of the most popular courses in the college curriculum.

Regarding then as settled the value of the study of English as a *linguistic* discipline, let us, for a moment, in conclusion, glance at its value as a *literary* discipline. This can be but briefly noticed, but there is less need for such notice, as it is not generally disputed. In fact, it is regarded by many as the sole object of the study of English. The literature is here brought into prominence, and the student is introduced to master-pieces of English style and thought. It will, I presume, be readily conceded that the student will appreciate more easily and more highly the essential qualities of style in a classic of his own language than in a classic of the Greek, Latin, or any modern language. We may talk of Demosthenian Greek and Ciceronian Latin, but if the ordinary student of Greek and Latin can, by much thumbing of grammar and lexicon, write his short Greek or Latin exercise without gross blunders in grammar, to say nothing of style, he will be more than satisfied, and will pride himself on his superior knowledge of Greek and Latin composition. For the large majority of students the only *stylistic* discipline that they get will come from the study of English models, and if they learn to write English without grammatical or rhetorical errors, pure in vocabulary and clear and forcible in expression, even if it lack elegance, the teacher will be abundantly satisfied.

As to those benefits from the study of literature that are dependent on æsthetic criticism, his own literature is the proper field for their acquisition by the student. The careful analysis of a play of Shakspeare, and the study of his delineation of the prominent characters, will furnish an excellent training for

the student's taste. The analysis of an essay, or any single prose work, of one of the masters of English literature, will supply an exercise for his literary judgment and reasoning powers. If reasoning, judgment, and taste are faculties of the mind whose training must be kept in view as the objects of literary discipline, where can more suitable means to this end be found than in the study of the works of English authors? Besides training his mind, the student will also be providing himself with sources of endless pleasure.

Finally, if we are convinced that the study of the English language and literature will supply all the advantages to be gained by the student from both linguistic and literary discipline, let us lose no time in at least giving him the opportunity to secure them. Whether anything, and if so, what is to be displaced to make room for this study in every school and college course, must be left to the decision of those interested; it does not fall within the limits of this paper. It has been my object to set forth what it is practicable to teach in English, the value of the study of English for all purposes of scholastic discipline, and its equal importance with any other study in the school and college curriculum. The individual teachers must settle how and where they are to place it; only let them not leave it out of their courses of instruction, and not fail to give it equal prominence with any other subject, for only so will its advantages be realized. No half-way measures will answer; for, if a study is to yield the fruit that it is capable of yielding, like time and opportunity must be afforded to it as to any other with which it may be compared. "A fair field and no favor" is all we ask.